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REMARKS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR MARCIA BERNICAT AT THE MODEL SAARC CLOSING CEREMONY

JULY 27, 2015

Good evening:

- Honorable Education Secretary for Early and Mass Education Mesbah Ul Alam
- Nepal Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission Sushil Lamsal
- South Asian Youth Society Members
- And most of all, Model SAARC delegates:

May I begin by offering my heartiest of congratulations!

What an exciting and memorable time you have shared in this Model SAARC experience.

We waited a long time for this project to come to fruition, and it was well worth the wait to finally bring you together and host you in Dhaka.

We thank our five other partner U.S. Embassies who sent you here – Kabul, Islamabad, Delhi, Colombo, and Kathmandu – first, for choosing you as U.S. exchange program recipients, and second, for selecting you as delegates to represent your countries at this South Asian – U.S. Young Alumni Dialogue.

Congratulations to the South Asian Youth Society “visionaries” who are responsible for the creative genesis of Model SAARC, and to all the SAYS volunteers who helped with workshop organization and logistics.

I want to express special appreciation to colleagues at the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who have supported the success of this dialogue in very concrete ways, including facilitating visa issuances, without which it would have been impossible to host you here.

Thank you all for joining energies, talents, aspirations, and good will to come together to convene a Model SAARC and South Asian-U.S. Youth Dialogue.

From listening to your closing session presentation, I am impressed by the scope of important and challenging issues you have addressed in your plenary sessions over the past three days.

Perhaps some of you wish that you had more time to delve deeper and explore more solutions to the pressing problems you see as obstacles to increased regional integration. But don't worry, this is only the beginning and there is plenty of time ahead of you!

Some of the problems you discussed may seem intractable, while others await creative new solutions from emerging leaders who are willing to think differently and not settle for the status quo.

You have made a tremendous beginning, having taken the first steps to learn from one another and gain new perspectives. Through these endeavors, you are well on your way to exercising leadership.

As tomorrow's problem solvers, we will be relying on you

- to overcome barriers and significantly increase intra-regional trade that stubbornly remains at one of the world's lowest.

- to you to increase access to education that will alleviate poverty and achieve more sustainable development goals.

- to find new ways to make communities more resilient to disasters.

- And use your innate power as the next generation to forge countless other new channels of cooperation that will foster greater shared prosperity. The future is in your hands. And I know the future is in good hands.

One of the main reasons the United States, cares so much about regional integration is the power of People-to-People ties.

Earlier this week, you discussed and debated in the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts. Senator Kennedy came to Dhaka University in 1972 on Valentine's Day and said, "The real foreign policy of America is, citizen-to-citizen, friend-to-friend, people-to-people."

The U.S. Government helps strengthen people-to-people ties in many ways.

Every year for the last 75 years, we have spent half-a-billion dollars on cultural exchange programs that build relationships with people from many fields and countries around the world.

You are beneficiaries of these exchange programs.

International study brings almost one million students from abroad to the United States each year. Education diplomacy is a strong pillar of our bilateral relationships throughout this region.

As one of the largest sending countries of foreign students to the United States, India has soared past the 100,000 student mark. Nepal sends about 10,000 students per year. And Bangladesh reached a new record, sending almost 5,000 Bangladeshi students to the United States this year. Students return to connect the United States with their countries and become stronger advocates for our shared values and interests.

In addition to exchange programs and international study, each of your countries has an influential diaspora in the United States which enriches our diverse population and each of your societies and economies as well.

The more we understand of each other's cultures, the better we understand each other, and overcome differences.

I challenge you all to look for new ways to expand ties that you and the people sitting to your right and left may not yet have imagined. Through this inspiring Model SAARC workshop, I am confident you have developed people-to-people ties and that you will find ways to further accelerate them. People-to-people ties, exchange programs, international study, and diaspora communities, are major contributors to improving economic integration, regional interconnectivity, and prosperity.

President Obama put it best when he said, "When we study together and we learn together – we work together and we prosper together."

You have put in a lot of work together over these past three days, and over the past months leading up to this Model SAARC experience. I am inspired by your commitment to regional integration

and your determination to make a statement that connectivity matters to the present and future prosperity and peace of the region.

I look forward to hearing more about you over dinner. Travel home safely tomorrow, and we look forward to seeing how you change the world in the coming years.

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**As prepared for delivery*